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**"Teach Psychology with a Sense of Humor: Why (and How to) Be a Funnier and More Effective Psychology Teacher and Laugh All the Way to Your Classroom?"**

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## **Choosing to Be Amusing:**

### **Theory, Research, and Practice of Humor in the Classroom**

#### **I Will Amuse You; Humor as Stimulus and Response**

The presentation of humor is a stimulus that intentionally or unintentionally is designed to create an expected "humorous" response in the person experiencing the humorous moment. While laughter is the most well-known response to humor, there are several other responses to humorous stimuli. Humor may result in laughter (physical), feeling uplifted (emotional), shifting thought patterns and enhancing perspective (cognitive), or bonding with the sender or other receivers of the humor (social). All of these responses are beneficial in the classroom as well as in students' personal lives. These responses also result in physiological/biochemical changes some of which have been measured while others remain a mystery (Miller, Mangano, Beach, et. al., 2010; Berk, Tan, Fry, et. al., 1989; Manninen, Tuominen, Dunbar, et. al., 2017).

What could be more central to the world of psychology than the concept of stimulus and response. Consider the classic conundrum, **"If a tree falls in a forest and no one is**

**around to hear it, does it make a sound."** If you tell a great joke in an empty room and there is no one to hear it, is that joke funny, humorous, or even humor? The tree falling or the shared joke is a stimulus, but if there is no "receiver" (someone to hear, experience, and respond to experience) is there sound or humor?

To understand the nature of humor and especially how it might be experienced in the classroom, we begin with the psychological foundation that humor is a *process* that requires a stimulus (a "sender" or trigger of the humor) and a response (a reaction by the receiver of the humor). If the **stimulus** conveys one or more of the universal traits (stimuli) of humor, then it is likely to trigger a **response** that is one of the primary reactions to a humorous stimulus. The universal traits that activate a humorous response include the presentation of a stimulus that exhibits qualities of: 1. Incongruity, 2. Absurdity, ludicrousness, or ridiculousness, 3. An unexpected future, 4. A pleasant surprise, 5. Being startled by a situation that appears initially threatening but is quickly perceived as non-threatening, 6. "Getting it," and/or 7. Emotional chaos remembered in tranquility (Sultanoff 2002). These stimuli, which trigger a humorous response, can be in the form of jokes, cartoons, word play, pratfalls, everyday situations, challenging moments, mistakes and errors, etc. The primary responses to humorous stimuli include physical, emotional, cognitive, physiological, and/or social reactions. These responses can occur individually or interact with each other.

To introduce the concept of humor into your curriculum, you can use humor as an example of the psychological concept of stimulus and response. In this way you teach

stimulus and response as well as introduce humor. Over time, as you continue to integrate humor into the classroom, you reinforce the concept of stimulus and response as well as infuse humor into the classroom environment. Students will learn the stimulus-response concept and by experiencing humor, will integrate the benefits of both sharing humor (stimulus) and receiving humor (response) into their physical, psychological, and social well-being.

### **The Intentional and Purposeful Nature of Healthy Humor**

If we intentionally and purposely integrate humor into the classroom (plan to use it and have a rationale for its use), then we can maximize its educational benefits. These benefits include: 1. Improved cognitive process (Garner, 2006); 2. Improved emotional well-being (Kuiper, 2014); 3. Improved classroom relationships among students and the teacher (Berk, 2014; Savage, Lujan, Thipparthi, et. al., 2017); 4. Reduced emotional distress (Martin and Lefcourt, 1983); 5. A more pleasant classroom atmosphere (Berk, 2014); and 6. Increased student engagement (Berk, 2014; Savage et. al., 2017).

Students are more apt to learn and integrate “material” when it is presented in a way that is engaging, stimulating, activates cognitive processing, and stimulates their brains’ pleasure centers.

There are many ways that humor can be intentionally and purposely added into the classroom environment including responding to students with humor, adding humor into lectures, exams, or slide shows, and using funny quotes, posters, or pictures to adorn

the classroom. Humor can also reflect classroom themes such as academic topics, holidays, seasons, school activities, etc.

Perhaps even more potently, you, as the instructor, can engage students' humor. By asking students to share their humor with the class, you delegate the challenge of creating humor and invite students to access their funny bones. This can be especially helpful if you see yourself as not particularly funny. (I am not all that funny, but I have collected an assortment of humorous cartoons, jokes, videos, anecdotes, etc. so that I am prepared to use them when opportunities present themselves.) Perhaps at the beginning of each class you might ask a student to share a joke or a funny story. (Of course, you may want to screen the humor in advance.) This can create classroom cohesion, lighten the environment, help students with verbal skills, set a positive tone, keep students attentive and involved, etc. (Berk, 2014; Savage et. al., 2017).

### **Humor Me**

*Imagine that you enter the classroom unaware of what the class pranksters have planned. Moments later an alarm rings indicating the beginning of class. The entire class knocks their books to the floor. While momentarily stunned, and yet unshaken, you look at your students, and with a twinkle in your eye, you casually walk to your desk, knock your books to the floor, turn to the class, and say, "I do apologize, class. This morning I seem to be a couple of moments behind on everything."*

It is reasonable to assume that most teachers, administrators, and even expert creators of humor would not be prepared to respond so cleverly to similar situations. To respond skillfully and spontaneously with humor requires practice and training (Ruch and McGhee, 2014; McGhee, 1999). However, we **are** capable of intentionally and purposely adding humor into the classroom to enhance thinking, to foster class cohesion, to develop empathy, understanding, and communication, and, of course, to add an element of fun.

While unplanned, spontaneous humor can have a very positive effect in the classroom, it generally does not occur frequently. “Planned humor” (that which has been stored in the brain’s “funny bone” and later expressed in a planned or spontaneous way) increases the prevalence of humor in the classroom. Planned humor is developed when an instructor cultivates and stores a treasure trove of humorous “items” that can be accessed in moments when the instructor “spontaneously” chooses to be humorous thus adding playfulness to the classroom environment.

### **Managing To Have Fun**

You may be concerned that humor in the classroom might get out of hand. While humor has many beneficial aspects, it can also exceed appropriate limits in the classroom. While encouraging humor, you will also want to manage the use of humor. Even fun filled humor can be distracting.

I recommend that you establish some humor guidelines. You can establish these yourself or engage students in developing classroom humor decorum. You might start with some global aspirational guidelines such as encouraging humor that is respectful, kind, empathic, playful, and caring, while also leaving room for humor that might cross any of these boundaries. When boundaries are crossed this can become part of classroom discussion.

Southwest Airlines is well known for encouraging humor between crew and passengers. On one particular flight an attendant crossed the line. The company used that incident as an opportunity to address the limits of humor. Since the company fostered humor, the employee was not reprimanded. Instead, Southwest shared the incident and used it as a learning tool to respect humor and understand that there are limits to its presence. Humor has both its place and limits in the classroom. As the instructor, you have the responsibility to manage the presence of humor to keep the environment safe and welcoming.

### **Humor in the Classroom; Someone's Gonna Get It ;)**

You can invite students to integrate humor into their own learning process, and thereby begin to build an atmosphere of broad-based thinking in the classroom. Because humor often involves “getting it,” it can be used to engage students’ cognitive functioning. (Berk, 2014; Savage et. al., 2017).

One extremely easy way to integrate humor is to post a daily quote prominently in the classroom. The quote may be humorous or thought provoking. After a while it is likely that students will want to post their own quotes. This is a simple way for students, who may be reticent at first, to become engaged in the emerging humor culture.

Humor stimulates divergent thinking. When a student shares a “funny” or even sarcastic response to a question, you can ask the student to share their thinking that resulted in that response. This invites that student, as well as, other students to “think,” and perhaps, think outside the box. As an instructor, you are not only building content learning, but you are teaching “process thinking.”

To enhance content and process learning, you can, for example, ask each student to create three questions for an exam. Each student formulates questions that integrate exam content with something that they experience as humorous. On one of my multiple-choice exams I ask the question, “Which of the following four stages is **not** one of the Freudian stages of development?” In addition to oral, anal, and genital stages as potential choices, I list, “The Elizabethan Stage.” This type of question is likely to tickle a student’s funny bone and helps students relax during the exam.

### **Fun-damentals in the Classroom**

As humor becomes interwoven into the fabric of the classroom, students become increasingly comfortable with humor. Of course, engaging students’ humor is only one way to add humor into the classroom. With modern technology you can add clips from

sitcoms or YouTube that are both humorous and illustrate learning points. For example, when discussing the concept of reinforcement, you might play the two-minute clip from *The Big Bang Theory* television show where the characters explore the difference between negative reinforcement and punishment and discuss the common error that negative reinforcement and punishment are the same which, of course, they are not. This is a fun and engaging way for students to learn that negative reinforcement increases behavior while punishment, is, well, punishment and intended to decrease behavior.

To be playful and activate student involvement you might create a “come as your favorite concept day.” Each student chooses a psychological concept (conditioning, reinforcement, emotions, resistance, listening, defense mechanisms, interpretations, needs, wants, small steps, etc.), perhaps writes a paper about it, and then all students come to class dressed in a way that illustrates their concept. To add a bit more playfulness and out of the box thinking, you can have students guessing the concepts represented by other students, and by explaining their guesses, they are demonstrating their understanding (or misunderstanding) of the concept as well as reinforcing that concept for others.

While discussing the benefits of humor you can reference the Bible. Proverbs 17:22 tells us, "A merry heart do'eth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit dri'eth the bones" suggesting that humor is healing.



In further discussing the Bible you can share how in Genesis it is stated, “In the beginning...” Clearly this is a reference to the creation of baseball. The Genesis “quote” is intended to be humorous. It is a humorous stimulus that illustrates “getting it” as the universal trait. However, if you did not “get it,” you missed the play on words “connecting” Genesis and baseball. Your not getting it serves as an illustration that in order to “get” word play humor, you must understand the context and be able to process the play on words. If you are not familiar with the phrase in Genesis, “In the beginning...” and the notion in baseball, “The Big Inning,” then you miss the context and interplay between them, and therefore, you do not “get” the play on words. The result is that the play on words (the stimulus) is not perceived (response) as intended, and no humor reaction is generated. In order to have a humorous response, the receiver must perceive the universal humorous trait of the stimulus which, in this example, is “getting it.”

You might mischievously test cognitive functioning by challenging a student with the following playful mathematical proof that shows we actually have 11 digits on our hands. In fact, I invite you to give this a try as you read the following proof. Later you can ask students to participate in the proof, but for right now, give it a try on your own. With your palms facing down, outstretch the digits on your hands. Select the outermost digit (the pinky finger on either hand). Starting with the number “10,” count aloud, one-by-one down to “6” (aloud: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6). Now add “6” to the 5 digits on the other hand. The total is 11, and you have “proven” there are 11 digits. Did you do it? How did you react? Did you feel a sense of playful wonder? Both children and adults (yes, and even

students) are often mesmerized as they try to figure out how that was done. Those who react to the proof as absurd, ridiculous, and silly (universal trait) are likely to experience the humorous, lighter side of the moment.

Many years ago, I taught creative thinking, and as part of my curriculum. I integrated an activity called “minute mysteries.” These “mysteries” were presented as an unexplained situation (often funny and silly), and by asking questions, students had to figure out the situation. It is similar to the game of twenty questions. When a state evaluator observed my class, her evaluation suggested that too much time was “wasted” playing “irrelevant” games. What she missed was, that as students asked questions and with some guidance from me, as the instructor, they were enhancing their deductive reasoning skills and having fun with the process. The “game’s” mystery was fun, and the engaging process enhanced thinking skill development.

In creative thinking we are encouraged to think “outside the box.” Here is a quick math problem that requires some out of the box thinking. Some people think you have to be “out of your gourd” to get this one. While some silly problems are almost entirely for fun, they can enhance problem solving and divergent thinking. One such example is teaching students to understand the relationship of a Jack-O-Lantern’s circumference to its diameter. I am sure you know that results in “Pumpkin PI.” While this is not a “real” math problem (although circumference to diameter does result in PI), students are likely to remember circumference to diameter and the concept, PI. This type of problem

creates an opportunity for students to activate their divergent, creative, and outside the box thinking.

### **Humor /S the Best Medicine**

Since how we think is directly related to mental health (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, et. al., 2000), humorous activities that enhance positive thinking (illustrated by thoughts of preferences, wants, and desires) and reduce negative thinking (illustrated by should's, must's, and have to's) can be powerful tools for well-being. You might create a treasure hunt where students are asked to seek examples of humor stimuli that shift thinking in a positive or negative way. Positive examples might include humor that changes thinking by fostering perspective while negative examples might include humor that pokes fun at negative thinking. An example of humor providing perspective is evident in one of my favorite Ziggy cartoons. In the cartoon, Ziggy is lying on the couch in the psychotherapist's office, and the therapist replies, "*It is not that the whole world is against you. There are billions of people who do not care one way or the other.*" The therapist is offering an alternative perspective to the common negative thought, "Everyone is against me." Peanuts cartoons offer many opportunities to experience humor shifting thinking. There is a classic Peanuts cartoon that pokes fun at negative thinking. In the cartoon Charley Brown repeatedly "should's" on himself. His last note to self reads, "*Perhaps I should stop shoulding on myself.*" This cartoon speaks to people who frequently place demands on themselves in the form of should's, must's, ought to's, etc. and can help individuals reframe their self-demanding, negative thinking.

I would be remiss if I completed this chapter without sharing some of the evidence-based support for the physical, cognitive, psychological, physiological, and social benefits of integrating humor into the classroom and, in fact, in all aspects of life. These benefits include:

1. **Physical:** Laughter is the *physical* reaction to humor. When students laugh their muscles contract and relax, and they breath more rapidly. This is energizing, makes students more alert, and relieves physical tension. (Berk et. al., 1989; Martin and Dobbin, 1989)
2. **Psychological:** Mirth, the *emotional* response to humor, brings joy, pleasure, etc. to students. It enhances an overall sense of well-being. In addition, the experience of mirth and distressing emotions (anxiety, depression, anger, etc.) cannot occupy the same psychological space (Savage et. al., 2017, Sultanoff, 2013). Humor replacing distressing emotion is quite apparent when during a heated argument one member of a couple shares humor, and the other member says, *“Don’t make me laugh. I want to be angry with you.”*
3. **Cognitive:** Wit is the *cognitive* reaction to humor. Humor by its very nature is a perceptual event. Students must perceive the humor and process it in a way to experience it as amusing. This stimulates thinking. Frequently humor does not result in a guffaw but is potent in the “getting it” and the activation of perspective (Savage, et. al., 2017). Peanuts cartoons are prime examples of humor that stimulates thinking and encourages perspective.
4. **Physiological:** When one experiences deep-heartfelt laughter, cortisol (the stress hormone) is decreased (Berk et al. 1989), blood pressure reduced, (Miller,

et. al., 2010), infection fighting antibodies increased (Berk et. al., 1989), and tolerance to pain increased (Dunbar, Baron, Frangou, et. al., 2011; Manninen, et. al., 2017).

5. **Social:** *Empathic* humor (as opposed to hostile or toxic humor) is recognized as a social lubricant. (Savage, et. al., 2017; Gray, Parkinson, and Dunbar, 2015). People bond when they share humor. Empathic humor solidifies social fabric (Berk, 2014; Sultanoff, 2013). The classroom is likely to attain an atmosphere of cohesion as humor helps stimulate students to become part of, and included in, the culture of the classroom. An empathic humorous environment creates a unique experience that includes physical relaxation, amusement, perspective, and bonding all resulting in a positive learning environment.

### **Contraindications: Don't Be Sarcastic With Me**

While humor can be a powerful experience for well-being and social inclusion, some types of humor, such as sarcastic humor, hostile humor, put down humor, and humor that sends a corrective message, can be toxic and divisive. When using humor in the classroom, we must monitor and be sensitive to humor that may be experienced as insensitive or negative. When humor is not well received, as psychology instructors, we have an opportunity to explore with students the negative aspects of the humor transforming a negative reaction into a learning experience.

## **The Punch Line**

As educators we have a powerful opportunity to integrate empathic and kind humor into the fabric of our classrooms. Even the least humorous, amusing, or funny among us can create a classroom atmosphere where humor is welcome. The humor “lessons” that students experience will not only add to their academic learning, but will likely become integrated into their unique, individual nature and generalize to their lifelong well-being.

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